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SUBJECT: TAMIL NADU SAYS LTTE TO BLAME FOR KILLING AND ABDUCTING FISHERMEN

REF: CHENNAI 00280

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Through a surprise announcement that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (not the Sri Lankan Navy) shot five Tamil Nadu fishermen dead on March 29 (reftel), Tamil Nadu has embarrassed and silenced Tamil Tiger supporters in the state. The Tamil Nadu government also alleged that the 12 Indian fishermen missing since March 4 are being held captive by the Tigers. If Tamil Nadu is able to prove this allegation, it will dash all hopes of reviving support for the Tigers in Tamil Nadu. Support for the Tigers suffered a near fatal blow with the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991. The revelation that the Tigers are responsible could provide the ruling DMK the opportunity to harden its stance against the terrorist organization, and thus to solidify its relationship with the Congress party. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) On April 27, the Director General of Tamil Nadu police, D. Mukherjee said in an official statement to the press that the Sea Tigers, the marine wing of the Tamil Tigers, shot five Tamil Nadu fishermen dead on March 29. According to Mukherjee, the six Sea Tigers captured by the Indian Coast Guard on April 11 admitted that their colleagues had killed the fishermen while the Sea Tigers were transporting weapons from a Tiger ship to a camp in northern Sri Lanka. Moreover, Mukherjee claimed that the 12 Indian fishermen (11 from Tamil Nadu and one from Kerala) missing since March 4 are in the custody of the Tigers in one of their camps.

¶4. (U) Chief Minister Karunanidhi confirmed the news to the State Assembly on April 28. "Initially, we were all under the impression that the Sri Lankan Navy was responsible for that firing. But I must now say with sadness that the information we have since received is that the Liberation Tigers are involved, something that shocks us all," he said. The Chief Minister promised to take all possible steps through the central government to obtain release the 12 fishermen. On the previous day, he had told the Assembly that he did not support the LTTE which has "no job here," that "it is not involved in any activity here," and that "their aims and purposes are different."

¶5. (U) The Congress party of Tamil Nadu, meanwhile, demanded the arrest of MDMK party General Secretary Vaiko for continuing to make public statements in support of the banned terrorist organization. The Chief Minister, however, was evasive on the issue and said that he would consult with the central government. [NOTE: When the rival AIADMK party was in power in Tamil Nadu, Vaiko had been arrested under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) and kept in prison from July 2002 to February 2004 for expressing support for the Tigers in a public speech. The state government later withdrew the charges. END NOTE]

¶6. (U) The Hindu newspaper, Tamil Nadu's most strident voice against the Tigers, in wrote in a May 1 editorial: "The time has come to remind the Congress-led government at the Center that foreign

policy, even when it involves Sri Lanka, must be made in Delhi - not in Chennai, and certainly not under the influence of pro LTTE parties. It has become abundantly clear that the banned terrorist organization, especially through the Sea Tigers and now a small air wing, has emerged as a security problem for India. The people of Tamil Nadu - who decidedly do not want a return to the benighted experience of 1983-1991 - expect both the Central and State governments to crack down on all groups and fringe elements that aid and abet, from Indian soil, the activities and cause of the LTTE. India must also equip its neighbor to deal defensively with threats to its vital installations."

17. (SBU) COMMENT: Tamil Nadu's governing DMK has a complicated history with the Tamil Tigers. Prior to the 1991 assassination of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by the Tigers they had broad political support in Tamil Nadu. But the assassination resulted in a serious backlash against them in Tamil Nadu. In the post-1991 period the DMK's primary opposition, the AIADMK, staked-out a strong anti-Tamil Tiger position while a DMK breakaway, the MDMK, took up the Tamil Tiger banner. Left in the middle of these two positions, the DMK, as the traditional party of pan-Tamil solidarity, has carefully expressed clear opposition to the terrorist tactics of the Tigers while maintaining its support for the broader cause of the Tamils in Sri Lanka.

18. (SBU) COMMENT CONTINUED: Until now, the mid-sea attacks on Tamil Nadu fishermen had been assumed to be the work of the Sri Lankan Navy. Tamil Nadu's pro-Tiger parties regularly used these instances to whip up anti-Sri Lanka passions in the state. The surprising revelation that the Tigers were responsible for killing the fishermen has silenced their supporters and slowed the drumbeat of criticism against Sri Lanka. But the silence may not last unless the government can successfully trace the 12 missing fisherman to the Tamil Tigers, as only then would public opinion swing decisively

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against the Tigers. Such a linkage may provide the DMK the political cover to harden its stance against the Tamil Tigers. Doing so would eliminate an irritant in the alliance between the DMK and the Congress party, which is led by Rajiv Gandhi's widow, Sonia Gandhi. Nonetheless, given its stated support for broader cause of the Tamils in Sri Lanka, the DMK is unlikely support any actions - such as direct military aid by India to Sri Lanka - that would materially strengthen the position of the government of Sri Lanka in its conflict with the Tigers. END COMMENT.

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